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SA 19 Talamanca SA 19

Bribri
Cabécar

- 764 are two ceremonies connected with death. The first takes place when the individual dies, and the second and most important is held about a year later and can be called a bone funeral as well as burial. During each there is a feast at which the remains of the deceased are present. It must be remembered that the basis of society among the Talamancans is the matrilineal clan. The laws governing such an organization require strict adherence to one's blood group even after death. Each clan, therefore, has its own communal grave called in both languages a *py* (see Funeral and Bone Burial). According to the Bribri, the custom of a communal grave was started by the Singers (see The Singers) who were also responsible for the respect given the clan. They say that the *py* are only about 200 years old. Among the Cabécar, they are not stone lined at the bottom and are covered by rough planks on top. The Bribri have a more elaborate design which includes a stone floor and a slanting wood covering which is left open at the front. It would be unpleasant to say the least to open a communal grave each time a member of the clan died. It would be worse when epidemics prevailed. The only solution then, if the society demands segregation on the basis of maternal blood, is to bury a person when there is no longer a trace of odoriferous material present, or, in other words, to bury clean bones. This is why the first step after death is to wrap the body in *bijagua* leaves, with, of course, the proper articles for the comfort of the spirit, and to place the package in the woods where it is well protected by briars and cut branches from rapine birds and beasts. After a year, when all the flesh has disappeared, the leaf bundle is opened and rearranged by the proper authorities and a package of bones wrapped in cloth is deposited for permanent rest in the clan grave where there is no risk of sin against the existing social order (see Social Organization).

- 764 On the Pacific slope, where the school has undertaken an educational program to incorporate the Talamancans into the Costa Rican republic, cemeteries, sanctioned by the Ministry of Public Health and blessed by the Roman Catholic priest, have been started. A description of a Pacific burial will be given

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761 later. Here it is necessary to note, however,
[178] that certain vestiges of traditional customs
persist, at least among the Bribri of Cabagra.

• [765] When a person has been dead and buried a
year, he is exhumed and replaced in the same
grave.

767 Official Participants in Death and Burial Rites.

764 There is an elaborate group of officials con-
764 nected with death and burial rites even today.
Each division requires certain preparation by
the individual taking part in the rites. In a
sense, these participants can be classed as lay
clergy. These "professionals," if so they can
be called, are of utmost importance when one

[784] realizes that the dead are strictly tabu to the
non-initiated. If, by any ill luck, a person

[783] should touch someone dead, a three-day puri-
fication ceremony is absolutely essential or
misfortune will befall him. This is true of both
slopes of the range.

[756] The principal figure in these rituals is the
medicine man, known in Bribri and Cabécar
as the *jawá* (see The Medicine Man). Next in
importance today is the Burier (see The
Buriers) who handles and wraps the dead.
Then follow the Singers (see The Singers)
whose place is now generally taken by the
medicine man as well as that of the Preparer of
Feasts. A medicine man, particularly on the
Pacific side, functions in all of these positions.
Among the Cabécar, there is a minor group
known as the *já*, and among the Bribri the
žarichak, who need no special training but who
prepare the things for the dead to take with
them *without* touching the body:

[756] The preparation and position of the medicine
man is treated under religion because in addi-
tion to his curing abilities, he personifies the
last remaining vestiges of former credences
and priesthood.

The other officials in connection with death
and burial have duties concerned solely with
these operations. They do not seem to form
part, as has been said by some, of the priest-
hood, but do have a decided social position
because of their task.

[554] because of their task.

767 The Buriers. They are known as *ókub* or
ókum in Bribri and *keri* in Cabécar. They are

[756] the only people, aside from the medicine man
who is all important, who can touch the dead.

They must also light the funeral fire. They are
[825] the only non-clergy who can touch a buzzard
or a possum.

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Bribri

Cabezar

765 Death feasts depend upon the means of the family of the deceased. On this occasion there were chocolate and coffee, plantains roasted in their skins, chickens, and pigs.

764 When it came time for the body to be bundled for disposal, the mother lay down on leaves and wrapped herself in *mastate* after which she remained motionless as if no longer alive.

[868] The Burier, aided by a boy apprentice, took leaves of the white *bijagua* and passed them over the fire so that they became soft and pliable. He sat on a low bench and removed the thickest part of the stem with a machete, putting the prepared leaf on another bench in front of him. He also had vines to tie the outer part of the bundle and wide pieces of bark cloth to cover the whole.

[15] The Burier, the Organizer of Feasts, and the mother were given a drink of chocolate in boat-shaped cups made of black *bijagua* leaves. The mother sat up quickly when offered the drink and moaned out loud in a little singsong artificial voice. When she finished the chocolate, she said a few words of thanks to the people present and became silent again.

The Burier washed his hands with water from a gourd and piled the banana leaves from the *tapesco* screen on the ground. He measured the size of the body with a stick and with a leaf. Then he put wide strips of *burio* fiber over the leaf.

[177] An old woman, dressed in machine-made material decorated with a striped design to resemble a woven skirt, appeared as a professional mourner. While the Burier proceeded with his preparations, she went into the nearby bushes and began to wail in a loud singsong.

[852] The children present screamed from fright at this unaccustomed noise, and most of the men left to fix the temporary resting place. During all this, the mother remained motionless under her *mastate* covering on the ground.

On top of the banana leaves and the *burio* strips, the Burier piled the *bijagua* leaves so that they overlapped, making one great sheet. He stamped on them so that they became more pliable. Then he took the corpse bundle which was tied with the hand-rolled cotton string and some vines and placed it on top of the leaves. As he folded the leaves over the bundle, he took the cotton from the stick and placed

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Bribri
Cabecar

764 were placed at one end of the spot where the grave was to be dug in such a manner that when the wick burned out the candle lighted. At the other end, the cross was put up. When the hole was ready, the coffin was lowered and covered with dirt. Then everyone returned to their respective houses except the few people who had been near the woman at death or had accidentally touched anything near her after she died. In this case, there were only the Buriers, the apprentice, and one man.

[713] These persons were considered unclean and
[756] had to be purified. The medicine man, who was also a Burier but had not assisted at the death, took over. First, he had them bathe in the river, and then, before entering the house, he put hot water in cups made of *bijagua* leaves and poured it over their hands and arms up to their elbows. Inside, chocolate, yuca, and maize were left in gourds for the soul to eat when it returned in the night, and there it stayed for nine days. A feast was prepared for the ninth day and the motions of saying the rosary were carried out as no one really knew the entire prayer.

• [765] On the tenth day, the *seté hucak* ceremony was observed. Fire was lighted with a stone and *cabuya* (see Fibers) wick. This was taken to the cemetery. Among the Talamancan Bribri there is a similar ritual, but the fire must be of cacao wood. Then four cacao beans, four grains of white maize, four *ayote* (pumpkin) seeds, four roosters (because the dead was female, chickens are for the males), and four gourds of chicha were placed in the house for the departed soul. The number is important as *sibu* (see Theological Beliefs) is supposed to have put four of everything in the world. The task of the Singer was performed by the medicine man and the Buriers, four in all. The history of the deceased was chanted: how she looked; what she did; how she played and planted; where she went on vacations or trips; what she bought and had; in truth, everything pertaining to her life. During this chant the medicine man and the Burier remained apart on two benches placed at the west. This ceremony began at 3:00 P.M. and ended at 11:00 P.M. with a feast of yuca, *tiquizque*, meat, chocolate, and chicha.

Funeral and Bone Burial. Attention has already been called to the custom of burying the bones

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Bribri

Cabécar

765 of an individual a year or more after death. The best description of such an event is presented by Gabb who assisted at the bone burial of the last famous "King of Talamanca," 114 765 Santiago. This has the historic value of an [643] eyewitness report of a ceremony which today is impossible to duplicate, and forms an essential contribution to the cultural background of these people.¹¹⁸

765 Only in upper Talamanca and upper Chirripó is this type of funeral still practised, and [184] at that secretly, because it is prohibited by [75] the Costa Rican authorities. The dwelling of the medicine man takes the place of the "casa grande" or big house which was used for the [756] purpose of ceremonials in connection with such burials. Here the bones are taken from the leaf bundle and wrapped in *mastate* by the Burier. Then this is placed on a long bench beside the doorway. The medicine man sings, 533 765 mentioning *sibu* and recounting the life of the deceased and all his actions, for example: how he planted, worked, what he did, and where he went. The song also gives the reason for his death. If the dead was female, the song recounts her doings. A feast follows and sometimes a dance.¹¹⁶

[535] 765 To the beat of drums (*see* Musical Instruments) and rattles, the people and the medicine man accompany the Buriers who carry the bone bundle to the graveyard. [764] Generally, this is situated on a ridge or near the headwaters of a stream. Here are located the clan graves known as *py*. These are deep, [824] round holes lined with four planks of an extremely hard wood (*Xanthoxylum* sp. called *suri* in Cabécar) which does not rot easily.

The Bribri line the bottom with stones, but the Cabécar do not bother to do this. The Bribri are more particular than the Cabécar in that the bones should not in any way touch the earth. An additional plank is inclined over the top as further protection. Each clan has its own grave which is used until it is full. [614] [178] Today, however, clans that are allowed to inter-marry are buried in the same shaft. The Burier removes the planks of the grave and puts the bone package in with his hands while the medicine man sings, explaining that now the soul has gone and will never return. After- [273] wards, he arranges the planks as before. Chicha

¹¹⁸ Gabb, 1877, pp. 300-303.¹¹⁶ Fries, 1938.

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Bribri

Cabécar

765 is often made and is drunk at the burial place
 273 during the ceremony. Pittier¹¹⁸ records the
 782 (Text continues TOP of P. 35(B)--Qualyst)
 825

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

614 The Clans. The Bribri and the Cabécares are
 616 divided into matrilineal clans which developed
 from moieties. Although a number of clans
 have disappeared through war and sickness,
 those which remain strictly follow the ancient
 582 rules. This emphasizes the non-marriageable
 614 position of all the mother's relatives. A vestige
 of cross-cousin marriage exists but is not
 compulsory. One can marry the mother's
 brother's child but never the offspring of the
 maternal aunt. On the father's side, beyond
 the father's sister and the first cousins, one can
 marry whom one wants. The importance of
 614 clan relationship is easily understood when
 673 one takes into consideration the moral code of
 these peoples. According to this there are three
 great sins which are placed in the following
 order:

- 1) To have sexual relations with own clan.
- 2) To allow an animal to suffer when wounded in-
 825 stead of killing it rapidly.
 224
- 3) To kill a man. (This may be the influence of the
 177 Roman Catholic Church and the government of
 Costa Rica.)

582 The need to adhere to clan regulations in
 614 regard to marriage is illustrated by the forma-
 tion of new clans as a result of marriage out-
 side of the tribe proper. This has become more
 important because in the past 50 years many
 164 clans have died out due to measles and yellow
 fever epidemics, and the always present
 amoeba. In Salitre, for example, a new group
 has been formed which is known as *terú*. This
 started when a Bribri man belonging to the
unirwak clan married a Térraba woman. The
 Cabécares are less inclined to form new divi-
 sions. Those who have inter-married with the
 166 Bribri do not remain in Cabécar territory (see
 list of Bribri clans).

614 On the Caribbean side, clans are associated
 423 with given geographical sections (see Villages;
 754 Land Tenure). The land is owned by the
 complete group and the medicine man in

¹¹⁸ Pittier, 1938, p. 26.¹¹⁹ Gabb, 1875, pp. 507-509.

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Bribri

Cabécar

765 sacrificing of a military macaw (*Ara militaris*)
 782 over the grave.

825

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

614 certain clans still controls and keeps ritual
 423 property. This consists of drums or gold pre-
 756 Columbian figures (see Myths: *Clan Protec-*
 423 *tors*). Formerly the *usegLa* administered jus-
 627 tice within the clan. Now the medicine man
 692 sometimes assumes this role although the most
 681 usual method is for the family of the culprit
 184 to take matters into their own hands. In ex-
 423 treme cases such as a sexual offense within the
 clan or murder, poison is given or the offender
 is buried alive. On the Pacific slope, land
 tenure by individual clans disappears. Three
 or two groups, as the case may be, settle in
 a given section such as Cabagra or China
 Kichá, and own land as a single unit.

These people know, however, of their
 Talamancan counterparts and keep as a goal
 484 the idea of visiting, at least to know personally,
 184 the home site of their clan on the Caribbean
 423 watershed. Clan-owned ritual property does
 692 not appear on the Pacific. The family unit
 on this side has been known to administer
 justice, but this task is usually left to the Costa
 Rican civil authorities in the nearest center.

614 Gabb does not seem to have considered the
 114 clans, rather he makes a distinction in social
 565 classes,¹¹⁶ indicating the Cabécar *usegLa*, or
 793 high priest, as the spiritual head of both Bribri
 693 and Cabécar, while the temporal ruler was
 693 Bribri. This lay head was known as the "King"
 693 and tradition holds that there were two clans
 of "Kings." These were not inter-marriageable.
 Only one clan of these remains today (see
 Non-Documental History of Talamanca). The
 793 Indians recount that the most powerful indi-
 692 vidual was the *usegLa* who spoke both Bribri
 and Cabécar. It is said that complaints were
 passed from the "King" to him for decisive
 action. On such occasions, he retired to a
 secret and sacred cave which had much *pita*
 (see Fibers) at the entrance. There he had
 sacred jaguars known as "dogs" and snakes at
 his command. The last *usegLa* is supposed to
 have died from smallpox during the first half
 of the 20th century. The clan of the *usegLa*
 still exists, however, in the upper Coen, Tala-

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Cabécar
Bribri

535 dance which was performed in a circle by men
224 and women with one person singing but the
533 whole group joining in the chorus. The song
recounted the experiences during a hunt.

525 There are various dances held in connection
[764] with death and burial but they are seldom seen
[184] today outside of upper Talamanca.

[765] Pittier²⁰⁸ mentions a bone dance performed
at the time of secondary burial by men if the
deceased was an adult and by women if a
child. The bone dance witnessed by the writer
was carried out by a line of women and one
of men. The person taking the place of the
[533] Singer (*see* Death) chanted the life history of
the departed, and kept time with a gourd
rattle. His four assistants in the line of men
had drums under their arms which they beat
as they danced.

[756] A different bone dance which is a remnant
[727] of a war dance with trophy heads is occasion-
ally performed when the medicine man is feel-
ing particularly sure of himself and wants to
celebrate. Men and women form a circle with
interlocked arms. It is said that skulls were
[178] once balanced on the arms. Today, nothing is
placed there. The men sing and the women
join in the chorus singing *ékéké* meaning
"good" or "well."

533 Songs. All sacred songs are basically Cabécar
even though they may be sung in Bribri. The
Medicine Man and sometimes the Burier
[198] sing these songs which are usually in ancient
Cabécar and are not understood by the masses.

Lay songs are common to the Bribri and
very rare among the Cabécar. The Bribri de-
light in inventing songs to fit the occasion.
Both men and women like to sing and do so
on the slightest provocation when working,
bathing, washing, or minding the baby. The
addition of words only for their sound is
[197] characteristic. Likewise, many Térraba words
are found in Bribri songs, the meaning of
which is unknown to the singer. In fact, the

[195] sung language permits all sorts of liberties as
well as having a certain vocabulary of its own.

[773] western Panama. The traditional home of the Bribri
[173] is in northwest Panama. *See* Stone, 1952, p. 252.

²⁰⁷ Segarra y Julia, 1907, pp. 594-95.

²⁰⁸ Pittier, 1938, pp. 25-26.